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“It’s embarrassing that my own body betrays me”: A
critical thematic analysis of young women’s accounts of
painful sexual intercourse with men.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Science

in

Psychology (Endorsement in Health Psychology)

at Massey University, Wellington

Aotearoa New Zealand.

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2019

Abstract

Recurrent pain during sexual intercourse is a prevalent yet stigmatised health issue that impacts almost a fifth of young women who have sex with men. Despite its significant effects on subjectivity construction, the majority of research on chronic coital pain has focused on causation and treatment from a medical perspective. Psychological studies that have examined women's experiences of painful sexual intercourse have largely ignored young women as a particularly vulnerable group, only including those who have been given a medical diagnosis and who identify as heterosexual. Additionally, the theoretical underpinnings of prior research regularly places the issue of coital pain at the level of the woman, with little consideration of the cultural and social environment within which she exists.

In the current study, I was interested in exploring how heteronormative ideals regarding sexuality and gender in Aotearoa New Zealand shape how young women with chronic coital pain understand themselves and their experiences, along with the subsequent possibilities available to them. I adopted the theoretical framework of feminist poststructuralism to make visible the particular ways of being and behaving that gender discourses allow and inhibit. My study used an anonymous online qualitative survey to gather data from 108 Aotearoa New Zealand women between the ages of 18 and 30 who regularly experience pain during penetrative sex with men. I undertook a constructionist thematic analysis, taking a deductive and critical approach to the interpretation of data, and applied the main principles of feminist poststructuralism to make sense of the themes generated. From my analysis, I identified a key theoretical concept known as the coital imperative. Six main themes were constructed from my data – 4 that supported the coital imperative and 2 that resisted it. These included: (1) the 'hot-blooded male'; (2) 'good girls' don't rock the boat; (3) the neoliberal postfeminist woman; (4) failed femininity; (5) resisting the coital imperative; and (6) alternative gender constructions in heterosexual relations. The findings of my study suggest that women readily draw on heteronormative ideals of gender and sexuality when constructing their subjectivities and frequently prioritise the needs of their male partners ahead of their own experience of pleasure. However, the visible adoption of egalitarian/feminist discourse that resists the coital imperative enables women to renegotiate conceptualisations of sex, allowing for equal pleasure and emotional satisfaction. As such, I argue that by unpacking the taken-for-granted assumptions of normative ideals, women are able to construct subjectivities based on adequacy and self-worth.

Acknowledgements

I extend gratitude to the Massey University Scholarships Committee for the financial aid that they provided for this research.

To the organisations who helped me collect my data: Thank you for advertising my study through various platforms, consulting with me during the recruitment stages, and for your enthusiastic support of my research as a whole.

To my supervisor, Tracy Morison: Thank you for working alongside me during this process and offering your advice and knowledge each step of the way. Your patience and guidance throughout this journey have been truly invaluable.

To my friends: You have all been so understanding and accommodating during this time. Thank you for putting up with my constant talk of vaginas and complaints about the patriarchy. In particular, a special thanks to that special someone who inspired me to research this topic.

To Mum and Dad: I could not have undertaken this research without your help. Words cannot express how truly grateful I am for your ongoing encouragement and support.

To my partner, Matthew: You have been my rock throughout this entire process. Thank you for your unwavering faith in me and unconditional love during my most stressful moments. I cannot imagine these past two years without you by my side.

Most importantly to my participants: I would like to express my deepest appreciation to all of you who participated in this study and so openly shared with me your accounts of recurrent coital pain. Your bravery and honesty have helped other women feel less alone in their experiences. You are what made this thesis possible – thank you!

Approval for this study was obtained by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements	v
List of Tables	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction and Context	1
1.1. Research rationale	1
1.2. Background	3
1.2.1. Theorising and constructing pain.....	4
1.2.2. Understanding coital pain	5
1.3. Key theoretical concepts.....	6
1.3.1. Defining discourse.....	7
1.3.2. Defining subjectivity and subject positions	7
1.4. Research objectives.....	8
1.5. Outline of chapters.....	8
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	10
2.1. Introduction.....	10
2.2. Conceptualising chronic coital pain in research	11
2.2.1. Locating the issue within the individual: Neo-positivist and biomedical research.....	12
2.2.2. Locating the issue at the couple level: Interpretivist research	14
2.2.3. Contextualising the issue: Critical theories	15
2.3. Subjectivity construction and the physical body.....	16
2.3.1. Constructing sexual subjectivity.....	16
2.3.2. Age.....	18
2.3.3. Gendered norms.....	20
2.4. Prominent discourses of sexuality	21
2.4.1. The ‘ideal woman’	22
2.4.2. Sexual hierarchies and (pseudo)reciprocity	24
2.4.3. ‘Real’ sex – the coital imperative.....	27
2.4.4. Resisting prominent discourses	29
2.5. The Aotearoa New Zealand context	31
2.6. Conclusion	32
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	34
3.1. Introduction.....	34

3.2. Key tenets of feminist poststructuralism	35
3.2.1. Language.....	35
3.2.2. Power, knowledge and discourse	36
3.2.3. Subject positions	38
3.2.4. Subjectivity and agency	40
3.3. Methods.....	43
3.3.1. Online qualitative survey method	43
3.3.1.1. Recruitment	44
3.3.1.2. Response rate.....	45
3.3.2. Participants.....	46
3.3.3. Procedure.....	47
3.3.4. Data analysis.....	48
3.3.5. Ethical considerations.....	50
3.3.5.1. Benefit to the participant.....	50
3.3.5.2. Informed consent	51
3.3.5.3. Anonymity and confidentiality	51
3.3.5.4. Protection from harm	52
3.3.5.5. Cultural responsiveness.....	52
3.3.5.6. Reflexivity	52
3.4. Conclusion	54
Chapter 4: The Coital Imperative	56
4.1. Introduction.....	56
4.2. Theme 1: The ‘hot-blooded male’	57
4.3. Theme 2: ‘Good girls’ don’t rock the boat	60
4.4. Theme 3: The neoliberal postfeminist woman	64
4.5. Theme 4: Failed femininity	67
4.5.1. An undesirable partner	68
4.5.2. The fraudulent woman	69
4.5.3. Troubled heterosexuality	72
4.6. Conclusion	74
Chapter 5: Resisting the Coital Imperative.....	76
5.1. Introduction.....	76
5.2. Theme 5: Resisting the coital imperative.....	77
5.2.1. Wider constructions of heterosex	78
5.2.2. Redefining successful heterosexual coupledness.....	80

5.2.3. Female pleasure.....	82
5.3. Theme 6: Alternative gender constructions in heterosexual relations.....	83
5.3.1. The ‘new man’	83
5.3.2. Resisting ‘defective’ womanhood	85
5.4. Conclusion	87
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	89
6.1. Introduction.....	89
6.2. Summary of findings.....	89
6.3. Methodological considerations	93
6.4. Implications of the findings: Implementing change	94
6.5. Conclusion	96
References.....	97
Appendix A: Screening/Demographic Questions.....	109
Appendix B: Survey Questions.....	110
Appendix C: Survey Information Sheet	111
Appendix D: Organisation Information Sheet.....	113

List of Tables

Table 1. Background characteristics of participants (n = 108)	47
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